

Kafkaesque

by William Cordeiro

The Great Conjurer reviewed October 28, 2006

The Great Conjurer, a new play by Christine Simpson now playing at the Kirk Theater, finds unique solutions to dramatizing the life of Franz Kafka, a writer whose often deliberately flatfooted, methodical prose does not necessarily translate well to the stage. In his famous unfinished novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, he represents modern man as lost in a bureaucratic labyrinth and subjugated to laws he no longer understands. Kafka's dark, dry, and comic tales portray the divide between one's imaginative longings and their inevitable frustration by material and mundane circumstances.



Tzahi Moskowitz as Kafka

Likewise, in his life Kafka struggled to reconcile his creative aspirations with the worldly expectations imposed by those around him. The question that *The Great Conjurer* asks is, Which should be regarded as more "real"—one's dedication to the estrangement of writing or one's homely responsibilities? To depict this schism, the set, designed by director Kevin Bartlett, is cut in half by three transparent scrims: a lone writing desk hunkers in the foreground while a whole tree trunk thrusts upward in the background amid blue streamers hung from the rafters. Both spaces, like Kafka's prose, have the force of realism, alternately minimal and magical.

In the background, the family from Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*, wearing eerie, oversized masks (designed by Melissa Crawford), hector each other until they're mutually helpless. The story's main character, Gregor Samsa, the well-meaning but despised brother who wakes up one day to find he's a bug, doesn't wear a mask but crouches in dance-like poses off to one corner.

The story's family doubles as Kafka's real family when the characters venture into the foreground. Gregor, played with spunk by Brian Nishii, stands in as Kafka's imaginative alter ego, hovering at times behind the writer, twitching and backpedaling like an overturned cockroach—just as Kafka himself will sometimes wander into the realm of his fantasy. There, he scrawls phrases on a chalkboard with Gregor's

THE GREAT CONJURER

Kirk Theater (Theater Row)

Category: unknown
Written by: Christine Simpson
Directed by: Kevin Bartlett
Produced by: Fluid Motion Theater & Film
Opens: October 20
Closes: November 4
Running Time: 90 minutes

Theater: Kirk Theater (Theater Row)
Address: 410 W 42nd St
New York, NY 10036

BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$18.00
none
Phone: (212) 279-4200

CREDITS

Creative Team Fluid Motion Theater and Film
Written by: Christine Simpson
Directed by: Kevin Bartlett
Produced by: Michelle Chen
Light Designer: Caroline Abella
Musical Director: Benjamin Ickies
Set Designer: Kevin Bartlett

encouragement.

Felice Bauer, Kafka's love interest, and Max Brod, his editor, friend, and father figure, both keep stolidly to the foreground. Brod, a conservator of Kafka's unsettling, evocative writing, argues with Kafka's father, who is constantly pressing his son to give up literature so he can settle down and find a good vocation. Dramatically, the tension is not fully realized, however, because Kafka's father never drops the mask, making him look fake, angry, and inconsequential. In hindsight, of course, the audience knows Kafka as a great writer and would naturally be inclined to side with Max (Andy Place) anyway.



Brian Nishii, Paula Wilson, Kelly Paredes, and Tzahi Moskovitz (back to camera)

The play's main conflict concerns Kafka's love for, and hang-ups over, Felice, to whom he twice proposes and twice spurns. One sympathizes with Felice (Sara Thigpen) in wanting more than an epistolary affair—Kafka wrote her more than 1,500 letters professing his passion. One suspects Kafka had more fidelity to fiction than to life: he wanted to write about passion more

than he felt able to act upon it.

While one may be tempted to dismiss Kafka's love life as nebbishy and neurotic, the writer's ambivalence is wonderfully staged by choreographer Wendy Seyb in a sequence in which Gregor pulls Kafka back from Felice as Kafka's legs spin out in the air. Kafka, forced into the dark crawlspace of his fantasy, seems less real than Gregor, the defenseless insect, who has emerged to take his place.

Tzahi Moskovitz should be commended for his understated portrayal of Kafka as a polite, beetle-browed boy. Moskovitz does not ham it up and "Hamletize" during his many searching soliloquies. The one exception to the generally solid acting is Paula Wilson, playing the rather superfluous character of the narrator, who appears bumptious, shrill, and overwrought.

Director Kevin Bartlett smoothly blocked the large cast so that its members' moves convey both dramatic and allegorical meanings. In addition, the pace is brisk but controlled throughout the 90-minute performance—and especially lively when the characters overlap their dialogue on occasion. Live musicians perform on cello, clarinet, and accordion from a small alcove above the stage during key moments, subtly framing the play with a historical dimension, as Kafka was writing as a Jew in Eastern Europe shortly before the Nazis invaded.

To Simpson's credit, her portrait of Kafka does not lapse into idolizing. He emerges very much like a character in one of his own stories: conflicted and unsure about the laws of love and duty, he endlessly

Costume Designer:
Deborah J. Caney
Choreographer: Wendy Seyb
Mask Maker: Melissa Crawford
Technical Director:
Gregg Bellon
Stage Manager/Assistant Director: Corinne Neal
Assistant to the Choreographer: Keith Coughlin
Assistant Stage Manager: Gregory Engbrecht
Cello: Steve Berson, Pablo Cubarle
Clarinet: Mario Maggio
Accordion: Benjamin Ickies

Cast

Paula Wilson as N (Narrator)
Tzahi Moskvitz as K (Kafka)
Brian Nishii as G (Gregor Samsa)
Kelly Paredes as S (Sister)
Roseanne Medina as M (Mother)
Michael Jerome Johnson as F (Father)
Andy Place as Max
Sara Thigpen as Felice

Crew

Electricians: C.J. Holm, Chris Monroe
Programmer: Leah Stegenian
House Manager: Amanda Herel
Graphic Designer: Mike Jou
Photographer: John Ko

tries to reinterpret them as he gets ever more lost in the maze of his own powerful fictions.